

Rocky Mountain Land Library, South Park's best kept secret

Emily Clingman, Editor | Posted: Friday, July 24, 2015 1:39 pm

Imagine rocking lazily in an old white chair on a covered porch, looking out over lush green hills. You're reading a book about ranch hands of the Old West. The breeze is blowing gently beneath a deep blue sky and the smell of sage inspires your senses as you sip hot, sweet coffee.

Later, in front of an easel, with a paint brush in hand, you're looking out the window of an old, yet perfectly restored, ranch house in awe of the spectacular Rocky Mountain view imagining the scene of cowboys tending to their horses and preparing their dinner in the yard in the glow of the setting sun.

Or maybe you're walking along the river, reflecting on a passage from a book you picked up earlier in the day about fly fishing. Or, you might be photographing bird species that you've never seen before.

These scenarios sound dreamy, something you might think about to mentally escape from being cooped up in an office all day. But experiencing these things are possible ... or will be eventually, as the Rocky Mountain Land Library transforms from an idea to an actual educational retreat of sorts.

Located at Buffalo Peaks Ranch, southeast of Fairplay on Highway 9, The Rocky Mountain Land Library is more of a concept, than an actual building, though buildings of books will be the main attraction.

"It's about connecting people to land and nature," said library Director Jeff Lee. "It's combining natural and cultural heritage like landscapes and mining and ranching."

The Rocky Mountain Land Library is a collection of books – at last count, more than 30,000. It's also a ranch with historic buildings that will eventually house these books and also guests. It's a residential library, a place for learning, research and inspiration.

"The central theme is people and the land," Lee said.



This is the life

Guests of the Rocky Mountain Land Library at Buffalo Peaks Ranch will find books wherever they wander. Pictured here is a collection of books in the main house overlooking the scenic beauty of South Park. (Photo by Emily Clingman/The Flume)

The idea is that people will come to the ranch to study or create, using the books and the scenery as inspiration. It will be a quiet, contemplative place, but lively. Individuals will be doing their own things, whether it's reading, painting, writing or walking, but there will also be camaraderie among the guests and community meals.

A kitchen in the main house will serve up healthy food, including fresh ingredients from its garden on the property.

"The kitchen is where people of the land come together," Lee said. "It's going to be an important component to our programming. It's all part of one culture."

Preservation with a modern twist

The library recently signed a 95-year lease with the City of Aurora (which owns the land) and will bring life to Buffalo Peaks, which was established in 1862 as a successful high mountain sheep and cattle operation. It's been 20 years since anyone has lived or worked at the ranch. The property comes with a main living house, a bunk house and old cook's house, a couple barns, a corral and a river trail along the Middle Fork of the South Platte River.

The renovation of the ranch buildings is an intricate work in progress with the help of University of Colorado-Denver's College of Architecture and Planning, Park County, the City of Aurora, South Park National Heritage Area and HistoriCorps.

"The historic structural assessment by CU Denver's architectural college was really exhaustive," Jeff Lee said. "They covered every detail, like how do you change a hay barn into a library?"

The process involves a combination of energy efficiency and historical preservation.

"We want to get that right so it will become part of the story of this ranch," Lee said. "A teaching tool."

Future plans

The project is fluid. There will always be something to do or add, but there a few initial goals that the library is working toward.

Phase one includes renovating the core structure – the main house, the bunkhouse and the cook's house, with the possibility of guest lodging as early as next summer.

Phase two will concentrate on converting the hay barn and the river barn into workshop areas, offices and additional libraries.

Maybe down the road, a learning center in Denver will be created to bring awareness to the ranch library and to add more color to the historical tapestry the project is weaving.

"We need both rural and urban perspectives to tell the story," Lee said.

Nothing else like it

The Land Library project has garnered national attention. In April, The New York Times wrote a story about this rural, live-in library, started not by a significant, deep-pocketed foundation, but by two book sellers with a dream. Lee and his wife, Ann Martin, work at Tattered Cover Book Store in Denver.

“There’s only one other place like this in the world,” Lee said, adding that the idea was inspired by a visit to the Gladstone Library, a residential learning center in Wales.

And, this week, NBC Nightly News aired a brief segment about the work HistoriCorps volunteers are doing at the ranch, notably building a new roof on the bunkhouse.

Visit now

While a long way from being completely up and running, programming at the ranch is currently underway.

This month, the library hosted an open house, complete with homemade biscuits cooked on a traditional outdoor stove accompanied with homemade jams and honey for its guests.

Upcoming events include:

Aug. 1 – Poetry workshop with Jodie Hollander

Aug. 8 – Reading South Park’s Landscape, a geology field trip with Vince Matthews

Aug. 29 – Leopold Bench-building Day

Sept. 12 – Summer book club (“The Walk,” by William deBuys)

Sept. 19 – Field sketching workshop with Sherrie York

“It’s really lovely that this is in South Park,” said Misi Ballard, who attended the open house July 11. Ballard is also of Great Old Broads for Wilderness. “Bringing culture and creativity together here, and it’s easily accessible from Denver, or northern New Mexico. It’s just wonderful.”

Anne Martin, Jeff’s wife and also a Land Library board member is just as excited as anyone for the project to really be up and running.

“We’re not quite there yet,” Martin said. “It depends on the funding. Every little bit helps. We’ve got someone who is donating one dollar a month. That just makes me so happy.”

For more information about the Rocky Mountain Land Library, visit www.landlibrary.org